

Background: The U.S. Capitol and its stately dome have become the international symbols of our representative democracy. As the nation has grown in size and complexity, the Capitol has responded with architectural additions and technological advances.

As the number of visitors to the Capitol has grown from 1 million in 1970 to 3 million in 2000, Congress recognized the need for better visitor amenities and accessibility, improved provisions for safety and security, and better opportunities for citizens to learn about their Congress and their Capitol.

Responding to these needs, Congress directed the Architect of the Capitol to design and construct a new visitor center that would welcome visitors to the Capitol in an atmosphere of free and open access. Since its inception, the design for the Capitol Visitor Center has been guided by four fundamental goals:



Artist's rendering of the entrance to the Capitol Visitor Center from First Street SE.

1. Security – The Visitor Center will provide a secure public environment in which to welcome and manage a large number of visitors while protecting the Capitol Building and its occupants.

2. Visitor Education – The Visitor Center will establish and present lively and informative programs on the workings and history of the Congress, the legislative process, and the architecture of the Capitol.

3. Visitor Comfort – The Visitor Center will provide the amenities, comfort, and convenience for visitors appropriate to the world's most recognizable symbol of representative democracy and one of the nation's most visited tourist destinations. In addition, all its spaces and resources will be fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

4. Functional Improvements – The Visitor Center will respond to the physical limitations of the Capitol by providing modern, efficient facilities for such functions as truck loading and deliveries, improved connections to the Senate and House office buildings, and improvements to vertical circulation, including new elevators.

Capitol Visitor Center Facts:

- The Visitor Center encompasses 580,000 square feet on three levels below ground and includes 170,000 square feet for House and Senate expansion space. It is an area roughly three quarters the size of the Capitol.
- The project footprint covers 5 acres (approximately 193,000 square feet) and is larger than the footprint of the Capitol building.
- Excavation required the removal of 60,000 truckloads of soil (600,000 cubic yards).
- The perimeter foundation wall includes 2,100 linear feet of slurry wall and 494 tie-backs.
- The structure is supported by 135 steel columns and 50 concrete columns. Steel columns weigh as much as 20 tons each.
- A 27-inch-thick roof deck is being capped with 200,000 8-inch granite pavers that match the historic Frederick Law Olmsted hardscape features, such as rose-colored granite fountains and seatwalls.
- Inside, the CVC will feature:
 - a **Great Hall**, which will include information and ticketing desks, and provide a spacious area where visitors can gather while viewing the Capitol Dome through grand skylights;
 - a large **Exhibition Gallery** that will tell the dual story of the development of representative democracy and the building of the Capitol;

- two **Orientation Theaters**, which will present a specially-produced introductory film that will prepare visitors for their tour of the Capitol;
 - a new **Dining Facility** with a capacity for 600 people;
 - two new **25-passenger elevators** from the Visitor Center into the Capitol, which will greatly improve accessibility within the Capitol as well;
 - **gift shops**, which will sell Capitol, House and Senate souvenirs;
 - 26 restrooms, including 10 “family” restrooms, and
 - a 1,000-linear-foot, two-lane truck tunnel that will connect to eight loading dock bays at the service level on the north side of the project area.
- **Historic Preservation:** The CVC design has, to the extent possible, preserved the historic East Capitol Grounds designed in 1874 by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed Central Park in New York City. More trees will be planted than will be removed and the grand views of the Capitol Dome will be restored along gently sloping and curving pathways leading visitors graciously to the CVC entrances. All of the historic “hardscape” features, including lanterns, fountains and retaining walls have been carefully removed and are being stored and restored as necessary. Each landscape element will be returned to its original location and all fountains and lanterns will become fully operational. In addition, a full time tree preservation contractor has been hired to monitor and care for trees throughout construction.
 - **Schedule:** Although originally expected to be completed in December 2005, unforeseen site conditions during utility relocation and excavation, and design and security changes prompted by the events of 9/11, combined to delay the CVC completion for approximately nine months. However, the western half of the East Front Plaza (the roof of the CVC) was completed in time to support the inauguration in January of 2005. The current overall schedule shows completion in the late summer/early fall of 2006 of all construction activities related to the visitor facilities. Expansion space for the House and Senate may be completed later.
 - **Budget:** The overall project budget is \$351 million. That includes a base budget of \$265 million for the core visitor center facility, which includes a new truck tunnel; \$38.5 million for security enhancements (added after 9/11), and \$48 million to accommodate unforeseen site conditions, additional management costs for scope changes, increases in security requirements and additional contingencies. The CVC project office is also managing the build-out and finishes of House and Senate expansion space, which together comprise 170,000 square feet. Congress appropriated \$70 million for this effort in November 2001.



Aerial view of the Capitol Visitor Center project site taken March 24, 2005. The roof deck is in place over the entire site and crews have laid close to 175,000 granite pavers on East Front Plaza.. Most of the work is now occurring below on all three levels of the CVC. Close to 30 stone masons are installing interior stone while crews continue installation of mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems.